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2014

# Robert Smithson

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### Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "Robert Smithson." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, 2nd Edition*. Vol. 6. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014. 6-9.

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**SMITHSON, ROBERT** (1938–1973), a prominent U.S. artist, original critic, and theorist, is known for the *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in Utah's Great Salt Lake and other earthworks. He was a continuing influence and significant voice with respect to environmental art and postmodernism, introduced concepts such as entropy and geological time into the making and discussion of art, and focused on the intertwining of text and visual structure or surface.

Smithson's artwork and writings constitute a major break with such twentieth-century practices and theories as abstract expressionism and the high modernist criticism of writers like Clement Greenberg. After early experiments with expressive painting and poetry, Smithson explored "blind spots" in perception in both sculpture and published texts, some of which were associated with minimalist tendencies in the New York art world. By 1968 he was publishing critical essays and manifestoes such as "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" and creating works that broke or challenged the frame of gallery and museum. This development involved formulating his signature concepts of entropy and the play of site and nonsite. Smithson's critical writings display the wide learning of an inspired autodidact who was years ahead of most conventionally educated contemporaries in absorbing many striking ideas of French structuralism and poststructuralism; he further adapted these to the situation of art in the American 1960s context of political turmoil, nascent environmental awareness, and the "post-modern" self-interrogation of the art world. Smithson's work involves not only earthworks but photography, drawing, temporary installations, linguistic texts, diagrams, paintings, and film. This entry does not attempt to survey the entire range of his artistic oeuvre but focuses on aspects of his thought and art most directly related to questions concerning aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

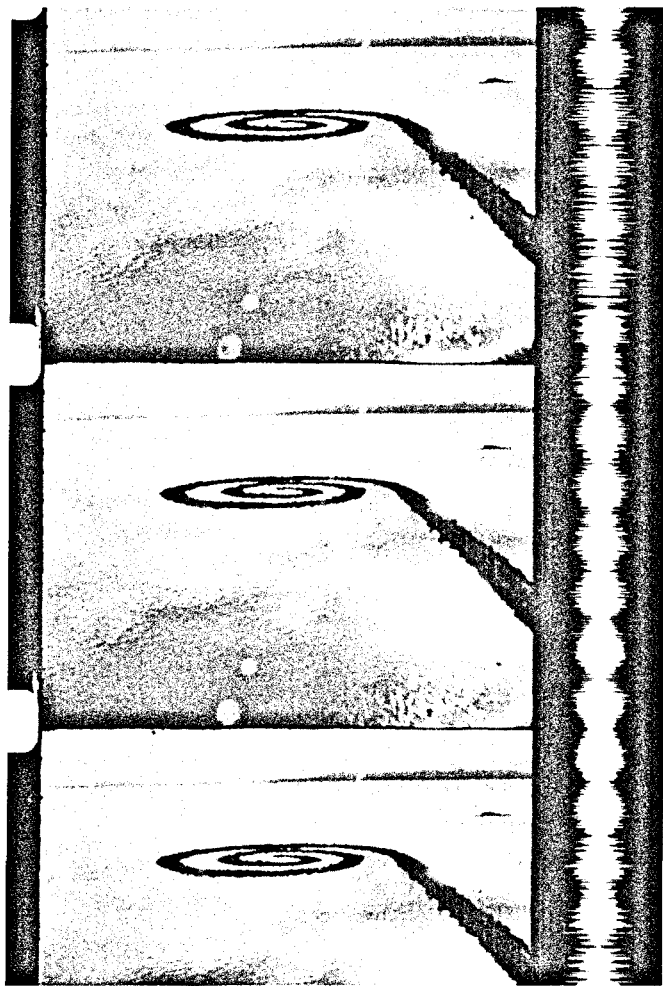
**Modernism and Its Problems.** One of Smithson's earliest published critical essays, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), a critical reflection on the work of artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and others, articulates several related themes concerning history and time that he would later develop: (1) the tension between artistic efforts to establish, found, or monumentalize and the inevitable force of entropy (conceived not merely as physical process but as social or psychological dispersion, ruin, sprawl, and

the like); (2) the questioning of modernism's conception of history, specifically of the history of art, as a progressive, cumulative, and significant process; (3) the possibility that artworks may slow down or crystallize the viewer's experience of time or somehow break experienced time down into multiple surfaces. Smithson understands entropy as an elemental tendency that becomes evident in the undistinguished and repetitive recent architecture of "cold glass boxes," as well as in the "vapidity and dullness" of superhighways, discount stores, and suburban sprawl. Here he could be said to be working out a phenomenology of sublime boredom, of what Hegel would call the "bad infinite." However, rather than rejecting this experience in the name of form, he congratulates the artists whose "new monuments" lead us to forget the future, while delivering us over to the neglected entropic dimension, which has in fact constituted the blind spot of an artistic practice that fetishizes the object as self-contained substance and meaning. In this way the new monuments can provoke us to reflect not only on individual temporality but on the narrative patterns that structure our understanding of the history of art. As Smithson goes on to argue in several essays, evolutionary and continuous narratives about art (whether along the broadly Hegelian lines of traditional art history or the more rigorously restricted ones of a modernist genealogy like Greenberg's) blind artist, viewer, and scholar alike to the presence of repetition, catastrophe, and ruin. He found suggestive models of nonmodernist, and in some respects nonnarrative ways of arranging and classifying the materials of art in morphological theories like George Kubler's, in Levi-Straussian structuralism, and of course in the methods of geology, geography, mineralogy, and cartography, some of which dovetailed with his early reading of contemporary thinkers like Michel Foucault. It is a distinctive achievement of Smithson to have not only articulated both a distinctive temporal phenomenology of the viewer, that is a revised transcendental aesthetic, and a critique of evolutionary and Hegelian approaches to cultural history, but also to have shown the aesthetic power generated by bringing together these two revisions of classic aesthetics and the philosophical history of art. Some might suspect that such formulations exaggerate Smithson's philosophical sophistication. Yet while he wrote with obvious irony that "In the museum one can find deposits of rust labeled 'Philosophy,' and in glass cases unknown lumps of something labeled 'Aesthetics,'" even one of his earliest sculptures, *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1964), challenges Kant, whose analysis of incongruous counterparts is crucial to his understanding of spatial intuition. The blind spot of perception is paralleled by the blind spot of modernist artists, who watch the current of history, hoping to catch its next big wave. In concluding his manifesto, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," Smithson uses the metaphor of the time stream (which he found in science fiction but which is akin to Kant's analogy of time and the river) to reveal the blind spot of the self-conscious modernist

artist and to offer a program for nonmodernist art: "The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes oblivion; because of this, he must remain close to the temporal surfaces. Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the 'death principle' (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remnants of art history, yet the 'present' cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must instead explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into places where remote futures meet remote pasts." Smithson does not use the word "postmodernism" here (although he does once or twice, incidentally, elsewhere) because he senses that the term can suggest that it names something beyond the modern, the next step in a meaningful succession. That would be precisely the kind of modernist thinking that leads to "oblivion" (the river turns out to be Lethe), the condition in which one has forgotten the very memory or suspicion that something has been forgotten.

**Decentering.** Smithson embarked on a project of dethroning the sovereign spectator, questioning the metaphors of modernist history, and exposing the blind spot of the artist who assumes the authority of either or both. Going further in this direction, he problematized the status of the center, whether with respect to the internal structure of the individual work of art, the politics and geography of the art world, or even the possibility of locating artwork in the gallery or museum.

While some critics describe Smithson's works and other earthworks as "site-specific," he actually questioned the simplicity of the site by stressing the open, binary structure that he called site/nonsite in both artistic production and theoretical writings. Such works consisted of a site in a relatively inaccessible place, like California's Mono Lake or the New Jersey Pine Barrens, along with an exhibit arranging and displaying material from the site elsewhere (in a gallery or museum), accompanied by maps and explanatory material. The work has no simple location, it exists in the tension between the territory of the site and the deterritorialized exhibit, in which (for example) a load of rocks are given a frame, a title, and institutional place of honor. Smithson relished the ambiguities of the play on "sight" and "site" here, as well as on "cite." The artist, he says, should be a "*site-seer*," both nodding to the degradation of the picturesque in popular travel aesthetics and invoking the practice of ancient shaman-artists who mapped and marked sacred spaces. The work can never be seen at once as a whole; the relation of site and nonsite is itself necessarily not available to vision. Sites were chosen for their isolated location and entropic dimensions. The site lacks precise boundaries—it is the place where boundaries are put in question. Smithson describes the process: "There's a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the *unfocused fringe* where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were.... The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the non-site, it



*Spiral Jetty*, 1970 (16mm film with color/sound), Robert Smithson. ART © ESTATE OF ROBERT SMITHSON / LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK / CNAC/MNAM/DIST. RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK

throws you out to the fringes.... One might even say that the place has been abandoned or lost. This is a map that will take you somewhere, but when you get there you won't really know where you are. In a sense the non-site is the center of the system, and the site itself is the fringe or the edge."

This dialectic—as he called it—opens a dizzying whirl of possibilities as the positions of artist and viewer are displaced and decentered. Smithson adapted Pascal's definition of God, to which he gave a deconstructive twist: God (or nature) is the being whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. The site lacks a frame, and its frameless condition is highlighted by the frame of the nonsite. The artist Carl Andre had offered a profoundly ontological (and dialectical) definition when he said that "A thing is a hole in a thing it is not." Smithson's principle that "the site is a place where a thing should be but isn't" is a variation on the theme.

**Textuality.** Smithson stressed the materiality of language and the textuality of matter, describing the strata of the earth

as a "jumbled museum" or a "heap of wrecked maps," while observing that words are not simply atoms of meaning or sound but can always "open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void." He sees meaning as both omnipresent and necessarily in a condition of (entropic) ruin, which helps to explain his frequent recourse to the metaphor of Babel and its dispersion of languages as providing a way of thinking about the affinity of art and earth. Smithson inventively explored the possibilities of "printed matter" in a number of essays, diagrams, and linguistic constructions (e.g., "Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction" [1970]); more generally he was able to focus on and provide a conceptual terminology for an aesthetic sensibility receptive to the mutual imbrications of text and earth, language, and matter, which has affinities with Foucault's meditations on the mutual entanglement of words and images in Klee and Magritte and with Derrida's general project of deconstructing language by demonstrating both the inevitability of linguistic meaning and its necessary incompleteness and failure to achieve totality.

**Picturesque, Environmental, Elemental.** Smithson criticizes what he sees as the naive and nostalgic aesthetic of harmony with nature and of ideal landscape exemplified both by the design principles of classic British picturesque garden style and in travel practices and literature directed to discovering and viewing supposed picturesque sites. His parodies of travel literature (as in "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" [1967] and "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" [1969]) emphasize the impossibility of eliminating the artificial and industrial, on the one hand, and the opportunities for dematerializing landscape, on the other. Gardens, Smithson suggests, have offered illusory escapes from both natural entropy and the reality of human transformation of the earth (characteristic of the era we now call the Anthropocene). Smithson has been a problematic figure for those concerned with environmental art. When one writer criticized "earthworks artists who cut and gouge the land like Army engineers" and celebrated ecologically minded artists with a light touch and a lyric sensibility, Smithson responded that those with such views "are the type who would prefer to retreat to scenic beauty spots rather than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people." Yet at the same time he praised Frederick Law Olmsted as America's first earthworks artist, even though Olmsted brought major aspects of the British picturesque style into the many parks, campuses, and grounds that he designed. What Smithson valued in Olmsted's work was his opening up the interactions of the "dialectical landscape," in which sites like New York's Central Park involve interaction between the constructed park and the surrounding city with its democratic, urban multitude. Smithson's essay "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape" (1973) remains the richest philosophical account of this major artist. Some continue to draw a distinction between "early" earth-oriented artists like Smithson, who created their signature works in the 1960s and 1970s and engaged in heavy

construction and earth movement, and more recent ones who leave only ephemeral (if photographically recorded) marks on the land; yet it can also be argued (as by Boetzkes, 2010) that both generations are concerned to focus attention on elemental and changing dimensions of earth, sky, water, and so on, and that it is specifically the decentering strategies of the work that enable this. Smithson makes this point quite emphatically in his essay and film that share the title of his iconic *Spiral Jetty*.

**The *Spiral Jetty*.** The essay and film are best seen not merely as commentaries on an autonomous work but as coordinated aspects of a single artistic project. In this sense the work has no simple location and illustrates Smithson's theory practice of decentering and his dialectic of site and nonsite. The *Jetty* was from the beginning a ruin, responding to entropic changes, rising above or sinking below the lake's changing water level. Rather than seek a meaning within modernist history, the structure is situated with respect to the decaying industrial world whose remnants are visible at the Utah site; Smithson seems to be commenting ironically on the fact that just a few miles away, the United States in 1869 celebrated a triumph of technology and speed with the Golden Spike, marking the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Recently, both natural and commercial factors have raised questions about the preservation of the *Jetty* structure; such questions become complex when articulated in terms of Smithson's concepts of ruin and entropy.

**Responses.** Critical responses to Smithson develop various directions of his thought and work. Shapiro (1995) emphasizes the affinity of its decentering impulse with Heideggerian and Derridean deconstruction. Reynolds (2003) provides an analysis of Smithson's "working method," focusing on his early projects of framing and displaying blind spots and involving a close reading of his entire archive. Graziani (2004) focuses on the political economy of Smithson's engagement with the American landscape in a study informed by Marxism. Roberts (2004) offers a corrective to the view that Smithson ignores history, articulating the ways in which much of his work deliberately and reflectively situates itself historically.

[See also Environmental Aesthetics.]

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